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DEPARTMENT OF WELFARE

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January, 1924

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# Using Foster Homes Wisely

*By* Charles G. Girelius

*of the*

Henry Watson Children's Aid Society  
Baltimore, Maryland



A paper read at the Harrisburg Inter-County  
Conference, November 15, 1923

*Issued by* Bureau of Children

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January 10, 1924.

Dr. Ellen C. Potter, Secretary,  
Department of Welfare,  
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania,  
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

Dear Dr. Potter:—There is transmitted herewith a paper on “Using Foster Homes Wisely” which was originally presented by Mr. Charles G. Girelius of Baltimore to the Inter-County Conference of Child Caring Organizations at Harrisburg, November 15, 1923.

The delegates attending the conference requested that the address be printed and given wide circulation. In accordance with this request it has been prepared for publication and is now ready for distribution as a bulletin of this Department.

Respectfully submitted,

Mary S. Labaree,  
Director,  
Bureau of Children.



## USING FOSTER HOMES WISELY

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All children need fathers and mothers. This is the prompting motive for placing dependent children in foster homes. The family is the fundamental unit of our social life, and a child growing up outside the family circle suffers loss. The problem is to make good the loss, and from that consideration springs the demand for foster homes. But the task as a whole is not an easy one to manage. The responsibility we assume is a terribly serious one. Our use of foster homes has not always been wise, and the consequences of unwise placing-out are sometimes tragic.

I recall a remark made by the wife of the superintendent of an institution I visited some years ago. The institution was of the congregate type; the children slept in large dormitories, were handled in large groups and were always under the immediate supervision of their care-takers. The superintendent's wife spoke very feelingly in favor of caring for these children right there in the institution, instead of placing them out. If these children were out of her sight, scattered in foster homes, she would not know what was happening to them and she would be worried. She wanted them where she could attend them and could respond at once to every call of need.

I realize the force of that feeling. If I had been called on to take any or all of the children of that particular institution and place them in foster homes scattered among different families, and out of my immediate sight except for occasional visits, how would those children fare? Would they all be happy and safe in their foster homes? We must admit that such a proposition is a pretty serious undertaking. We could not know all that might be happening to those placed-out children. During the years in which I have been supervising placed-out children, I have sometimes discovered to my sorrow that serious things had happened. So far as immediate protection is concerned, any given group of dependent children cannot all be as safe when placed in foster homes as those same children would be under the shelter of an institution.

That there is an element of peril in the placing out of children we must admit, and we who are engaged in this work are not fit for the task unless we do realize the peril. At the same time, we must not allow ourselves to be discouraged by a realization of the peril. That fact should only make us more careful, more vigilant, more alert to do our work wisely. We should keep in view a vision of the great end to be attained—the highest possible welfare of each individual child in our care. The child has certain needs that we believe only the foster home can meet, and the satisfying of those needs justifies our utmost endeavor in the child's behalf.



Before we can consider the using of foster homes wisely, we must necessarily give attention to the type of child we propose to place. The field for the placing-out agency is that of the normal child. The care of the delinquent child and the physical or mentally defective child belongs usually to the institution. However, every placing-out agency is bound to find itself in possession of a number of difficult and defective children. They come to us on the presumption that they are normal, only to be later discovered to be otherwise. For a very few of these, we may find satisfactory places in family homes, such as an occasional delinquent child, or some mildly feeble-minded child who is amendable to control and can be trained. However, the attempt to place even mildly delinquent and defective children works injustice to the families we place them with, unless we first take them fully into our confidence.

With the normal child then in mind, there is a definite preparatory work before the child is ready for placement. No child should be placed before its health is carefully studied and defects of health remedied as far as is possible. We should not place a child until we know the condition of its sight, hearing, teeth, general health. We should engage the services of doctors, dentists, hospitals, clinics, until we are assured that everything possible has been done for the child's physical condition. Also we need to understand the child's temperament, mental capacity, personality. Otherwise, we shall not know in what type of foster home we should place the child.

To understand the child fully, we need to know its family history, possible hereditary tendencies, etc. All this is needful in order to know what plans to make for a child, whether or not the child should be considered at all for placing-out and in order to judge intelligently what type of home is required for each particular child.

Passing now directly to the consideration of foster homes, the first step is to secure applications. This is not a very difficult matter. Usually there is no lack of applications, when it becomes known that we have children to place. The most difficult children to find homes for I have in my experience found to be the boys between five and eight or nine years of age. When suitable applications are lacking, it is well to seek homes by advertising, or by personal solicitation. Our best advertisement is the foster homes in which we already have children happily placed.

Prospective applicants having made known by letter, telephone, or office call their wish to have a child, the next step is to have them sign a regular application form and subscribe to certain conditions of placement. The conditions of placement should include the requirements that the guardianship and legal control of the child shall remain in the placing-out agency or institution, unless legally adopted; that the agency shall have access to the child and to the home; that the agency shall have the right to remove the child, if the child's welfare requires it; that the child shall be received by the applicants as a member of the family circle and treated as their own would be treated (but make sure you know how their own would be treated); that the child shall have opportunities for education, recreation, religious training, etc.



The next step is to communicate with references, and following that, an investigation of the applicant's home by a representative of the agency. The written recommendations of references have some value; but it is a mistake to accept these recommendations as final. The visitor from the agency should interview personally a sufficient number of reputable citizens in the community of the applicants to make certain as to their character and standing in the community.

The home itself should be visited. The visitor should become acquainted with the applicants and should make every effort to make them understand the responsibility they assume and the standards by which the placing-out agency gages that responsibility. Care should be taken not to offend, but the visitor should not hesitate to make the investigation thorough. The visitor should keep in mind the thought that her decision to place a child in this home involves the child's whole future career—a fact akin to the situation on the top of the watershed of the Rocky Mountains, where just the slightest dip of the ground decides whether the water from a certain spring shall flow westward by way of the Columbia River into the Pacific Ocean, or eastward by way of the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers into the Gulf of Mexico. If the visitor can put this thought across to the minds of the applicants, they will not be offended by the thoroughness of her inquiries. If they are offended, then the visitor has discovered the best reason in the world for rejecting the application.

The motive prompting the applicants for a child should be ascertained. If they ask for a baby, it is almost certain that the motive is genuine, provided it is more than a passing fancy. Their fitness for taking a child needs chiefly to be considered. But if they apply for a large boy or a large girl, then scrutinize the motive closely. The farmer too often wants a boy to work on his farm. The housewife wants a large girl for a servant. There is nothing wrong in wanting a boy or girl for the sake of the service they can reasonably be expected to render, provided there is a willingness on the part of the foster parents to give in return an ample compensation in a fair wage or its equivalent, plus the personal interest and care that parents should give to their own children. A certain amount of work is a necessary part of the child's education, and the child should want to give something in return for benefits received, but he must not be exploited.

We want loving and conscientious foster parents who are willing to keep foremost their interest in the child's welfare, whether the child be large or small. They should be able to understand the child and know his needs, to enter into the child's life and to see the world from the child's viewpoint. They should be capable of giving a kind but firm discipline in a spirit that is tolerant toward non-essentials of conduct, but equal to meeting the exigencies of serious misconduct. Corporal punishment is to be discouraged as something that need not be resorted to by foster parents who know how to deal wisely with the child. The problems of training children who have been socially unfortunate do not differ essentially from the problems of the ordinary child. The foster parents should be sensible enough to make allowance for a few badly formed habits due to previous neglect, to take the child as he comes to them, and to undertake from that point

the development of the child's character by the same careful training that any child requires.

Each child should be permitted to attend the church to which he belongs and be reared in his own faith, placed preferably with a family professing the same faith, and never with a family professing a widely different faith. In regard to education the foster parents should afford opportunity for at least the minimum schooling required by the laws of the State. But the minimum schooling as required by law we must regard as a meager provision, and we ought to work toward a more generous opportunity, especially for the more promising children. The home should be within a reasonable distance of a good school.

Provision for the child's physical needs calls for a room that is clean, comfortable and suitably located in relation to other members of the family—a room that the child can regard with pride and call its own; clothing of such quality that the child shall not suffer by comparison with other children in the neighborhood; good and plain wholesome food; and opportunity for play and sleep necessary for the building of strong bodies. The family should be willing to provide medical and dental treatment, but the placing-out agency will do well to offer its own resources when it appears advisable to do so.

Special care must be taken when there is in the family a child of the opposite sex and near the same age. Here we must remember that not only is our own ward to be protected but the other child as well. Such placement should be made only, if at all, after a frank discussion with the prospective foster parents and a careful consideration of the sex tendencies of the children concerned. The agent must be assured that the foster parents are fully capable of controlling the situation.

I hesitate to say that in the selection of a foster home the agent should be governed by intuition as well as judgment. But I do know that I have myself come to grief when I have disregarded my intuitions. Certain prospective homes have every appearance of being good homes. You cannot give a tangible reason why you should not place a child in such a home. But you have an uneasy feeling that you are not quite sure of the motives of the applicants or of a vague something underlying their apparent character. My advice is, when in doubt, do not use the home!

If the application is to be rejected, that ends the incident so far as that application is concerned, except to perform this somewhat delicate operation as painlessly as possible.

If the application is approved, there is still much to be considered. It is unthinkable that this home is suitable for any child that you might place, of the age and sex wanted. It is not sufficient to determine that a particular applicant's home is a good one; it must be a good home for some particular child with just the personality that will enable it to fit into that home. Applicants frequently say they want a child with blue eyes and light hair, or they want brown eyes, etc. These are mere trifles. The personality of the applicants, their motives, desires, temperament, education, refinement, on the one

hand—the individuality, temperament, capacity of the child on the other hand—are the important facts to be considered, if you are going to use the home wisely.

The child will be placed on trial. The placing-out agency will retain the right to supervise the child and the home, and will exercise the privilege of removing the child, if the child placed does not make a satisfactory adjustment, or if the home does not come up to expectation. But the removing of a child is embarrassing at best, and always means another more or less violent break in the child's life. Therefore, it is most important that the first placement be made with utmost care. We are not infallible and mistakes will be made; but a careful study of the home and of the child should reduce to a minimum any necessary readjustments. Even at that, after we have placed a child, we should not regard our judgment in placing the child in a certain home as final. Alert and diligent supervision of the child must continue, with the hope that the placement has been a wise one, but with a readiness to protect the child by removal, should such a course be necessary.

However, it would be a sad state of affairs if we must forever watch with suspicion the family to whom we have entrusted one of our wards. The very purpose of the original investigation of a proposed foster home and of the continued supervision of the home if used is to eliminate suspicion and to establish a relationship of confidence between the foster home and the agency. The whole thing is a process of getting acquainted, with the hope that acquaintanceship will ripen into friendship. When once the character of the family has been established, then the relationship of unsuspecting confidence should begin. If the child on its part has proved its ability to fit into the family, then we may at last regard the placement as being essentially permanent.

But even now the agency does not relinquish supervision. It still holds legal guardianship and must not lose contact with the child. Legal adoption may result, and in that case the agency surrenders custody and discontinues supervision, but legal adoption should not be permitted until its desirability is fully established. If the foster parents do all for the child that can possibly be done for it, then supervision may resolve itself to a mere friendly and social contact with the family. When this status is attained, we have a situation approximating the ideal—a child has found an ideal home. But ideal homes can only be exceptions at best. We are wise if we discard the use of the word *ideal* altogether, except as we apply it to a standard not yet reached. We need a few words for our vocabulary of the unattained, for that is a region we must not lose sight of.

We are therefore not going to place many of our dependent children in *ideal* homes. But we are not going to discard a home for one of our placed-out children because the home is not ideal. We are going to use a foster home if it comes up to certain reasonable standards. Every foster home is likely to have some shortcomings. We are not going to hold these shortcomings against the home, but the visitor who goes into that home should understand the shortcomings in order to supervise wisely.



It is right here that the principles of case study and case work should come into play in just as real a sense as case study and case work were needful when the child originally came to the notice of the agency. A child in a foster home is a case requiring study and work. Plans need to be made and objectives should be kept in view. The visitor should be ready to give advice when it is wanted, or when it is expedient and needful even if not wanted. Again the visitor should be ready to give encouragement, for foster parents sometimes get discouraged. The child himself develops problems. Just as certainly as we do not find ideal homes, so we do not place ideal children, and some of the children we place are trying enough at times, and unappreciative and mischievous after the manner of children generally. Innumerable complications arise, and the alert, conscientious visitor will find opportunities enough to be of service to both child and foster parents. If the visitor is alive to her responsibilities and deals with each situation with kindness and tactfulness, she will be more than welcome in the foster home. Nevertheless, she should not fail to be positive and severe, if the occasion requires.

The objective to be kept constantly in view is the establishment of the child in a genuine family home, so that he shall have a true part in home life and in community activity, so that he shall become as nearly as possible one of the boys and girls in the community, and have as good an opportunity as they to make good in life and to attain to such success as his own ambition, effort and natural capacity may make possible. Unfortunately, not many people of any given community see this object as we see it. It is difficult for foster parents to see it. It is difficult for the children themselves to see it. Many think of the child as a "taken" child or a "bound-out" child, or a "home" child, terms that distinguish the placed-out child from other children in a way that is derogatory to the placed-out child. The child knows this and feels humiliated. The foster parents should be taught otherwise. The supervising visitor should regard the child under her supervision as in a real sense her own, and should be moved by a feeling akin to the maternal instinct, ever ready to fly to the defense and help of her charges. She should have the capacity for resenting with a true mother's feeling any reflection cast upon these children and becoming righteously indignant if the children are mistreated or deprived of that to which they are entitled.

It should be brought home to the mind of the foster parents, to the mind of the child, to the mind of the community, that the placed-out child as such is not an inferior child. A particular child may be inferior in many ways, but it is not an inferior child because it happens to be a ward of an institution or a Children's Aid Society. That child is as good as any other child of similar character and capacity. The dull child is a dull child, and the bright child is a bright child, and as such our placed-out children must find their respective levels. But they are not "home" children or "taken" children in the disparaging sense in which these terms are so frequently used, with the implied if not spoken comment that "anything is good enough for a home child, and that it ought to be grateful for that." There is no reason in the world why such a child should be grateful for a meager care, and I confess that my sympathies are

with the boy who has initiative enough to run away, if he does not get a fair deal. The child is entitled by inherent right to such care and training and opportunity as shall make his life useful and worth living. And the community is entitled to a future citizen in the person of that child who shall be competent to carry the responsibilities of citizenship. I want a child to take advantage of opportunities that we may be able to offer him, and prove himself worthy of them, but I do not expect a child to be grateful in the ordinary sense of the word.

The foster home is the avenue by which the dependent child is to make contact with the community and find its true place in the community life. The family that takes a child is therefore under obligation to introduce the child to the community, to give that child a place in the community life, in the school, in the church, in social and recreational activities, and finally in some worthwhile occupation. The standing of the child will be determined largely by the standing of the foster parents and their attitude toward him, and largely by the child's own personality and responsiveness.

In placing the child, then, we are asking the foster parents to become partners with us in working for the welfare of the child. We are receiving the foster parents as actual members of the placing agency's staff of workers. They are a genuine part of the organization and if the foster parents can be made to see this, they will begin to appreciate the dignity and the responsibility that rests upon them.

Our work of placing children in foster homes has its perplexities and problems and disappointments, and I have had my share of them, but I have also seen some of the finest of results attained. I recall a four year old girl I once visited in her foster home—a girl that I had myself taken away from a most disreputable and unfit father. I found her playing with her dolls, and she talked to me about her dolls in a most interesting way. I was so impressed by the child's manifest happiness, that I remarked to the foster parents, people of splendid character and refinement, "Betty's dolls are receiving better care and more love than she herself had ever received before coming into your home."

One boy graduated at City College, Baltimore, spent a year and a half overseas as a sergeant, attended Lehigh University for a year, then secured a position with the Pennsylvania Railroad, where he had been promoted to a position of trust at a good salary.

To come closer to the immediate present, we are particularly gratified that two of our wards graduated last spring from the Maryland State Normal School, and both of them are now teaching. One of them has among her pupils three of our younger wards. Another of our girls has just completed an art course at the Maryland Institute. One of our boys, still under our supervision, is taking a course at the University of Pennsylvania. A considerable number of our wards are in High School. All of which shows that these children are not being exploited for their labor, but are really being prepared for life.

In many cases, the foster parents make entire provision for such educational opportunities. In other cases, we have to help. One

boy, placed last year in a lawyer's family at the age of fifteen, is now in the third year of high school, and the foster parents indicate a willingness to prepare him for any profession that he may chose. Other wards are entering humbler walks, becoming chauffeurs, mechanics, factory-workers, farmers, telephone operators, clerks in stores, office employees, etc. Some go into the Army and some go into the Navy.

Those of us who are engaged in placing children in foster homes and supervising them in their homes, have opportunities enough to see many of the unattractive sides of human nature. Foster parents disappoint us. Some prove selfish and want children only for the work they can do. Some are well-meaning enough, but they fail to understand the needs of the child. On the other hand, some of our children fail to respond to the opportunities given them. This must not discourage us nor make us cynical. It should only make us more devoted to our work, more watchful over the children in our charge, more patient in our effort to inspire the foster parents with the spirit of our own devotion. The foster parents must be made to realize how great a crime it is for them to take a child in a selfish spirit, but how good and wonderful service they render, when they take a child for the purpose of helping the child. If ever we can render a service entirely pleasing to God, this is such service.





